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To imitate all that is hidden. The place of mimesis in Adorno's theory of musical performance

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Abstract. The article examines the use of the concept of mimesis in Adorno's notes towards a theory of musical performance. In trying to idiosyncratically define the latter as "reproduction", Adorno relied on a framework elaborating on concepts introduced by Arnold Schoenberg, Hugo Riemann and Walter Benjamin – a framework that the article discusses insofar as it deals with the problem of mimesis. Specific attention is devoted to the relation between Benjamin's essays on language and translation and Adorno's theory of notation, that soon became the crucial aspect of his theory of reproduction. Given the shortcomings of Adorno's theory, which in the end did not achieve its goals, the article proposes to capitalize on his terminology while at the same time rethinking his framework in the light of recent musicological paradigms for the study of musical performance. On the whole, the article shows that it was Adorno's philosophical assumptions – in particular the theses of music's non-intentionality and of its non-similarity to language – that prevented him from convincingly theorizing musical performance, and suggests an alternative framework for future research.

Key words. Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, musical performance, mimesis, language.

«Reproduction» (*Reproduktion*) is the term Adorno uses in his notes *Zu einer Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion* (Adorno [2001]) to signify an ideal musical performance as exactly corresponding to (some aspects of) the musical work, and in this sense as «the true performance» (*die wahre Aufführung*). In other words, he conceives of musical performance in terms of mimesis – albeit of a particular kind:

True reproduction is the x-ray image of the work. Its task is to render visible all the relations [...] that lie hidden beneath the surface of the perceptible sound – and this through the articulation of precisely that perceptible manifestation. (Adorno [2006]: 1)

Here Adorno uses visual metaphors so as to directly transfer them to the domain of the audible – of music as sound – thus supposing a shared medium between the imitation and its model. This would offer an interesting perspective on all musical practices of oral-aural tradition based on the direct imitation of sound, whether in performance or in recordings, that is, without the mediation of a musical text (the score). But Adorno explicitly and exclusively refers his theory of reproduction to the Western art music written tradition, which requires some conceptual contortions resulting in an «idiosyncratic use of the concept of “mimesis”» (Gritten [2014]: 97).

As regards the Western art music tradition, the musical work, whose reproduction should act like an x-ray image, is not identical to the musical text as score. The concept of musical work encompasses the musical text and its possible or actual performances. Yet, Adorno, along with the compositional and theoretical tradition on which he relies, maintains that in the history of written art music the concept of musical work has increasingly established a special relation with the score, to the extent that the latter has come to represent in technical, aesthetical and cultural terms the most accurate, even direct image of the musical work.

Adorno capitalizes on this assumption by taking to the extreme the idea of a mimetic relation between text and performance, in both directions: «NB if notation mimics music, then performance must mimic written music» (Adorno [2006]: 60). This implies or would imply an idea of the musical text as immediate mediation, permitting a direct reproduction – in performance – of the idea the text reproduces as a written score. At any rate, these are the reasons why Adorno's notes soon transfer the idea of the x-ray image – a particular kind of mimesis – from the domain of the work as perceptible sound to the domain of the notated text:

Mimetic root of all music. This root is captured by musical interpretation. Interpreting music is not referred to without reason as music-making – accomplishing imitative acts. Would interpretation then accordingly be the imitation of the text – its “image”?

Perhaps this is the philosophical sense of the “x-ray image” – to imitate all that is hidden. (Adorno [2006]: 4)

To specify this philosophical sense, Adorno composes a theoretical framework involving and combining issues deriving from three of his tutelary deities: Arnold Schoenberg, Hugo Riemann and Walter Benjamin.

Adorno primarily elaborates on a terminology he learned from Schoenberg. The key concepts are «reproduction» – defined as an ideal musical performance's conformity to an ideally shaped (written) composition – and the «subcutaneous» (*das Subkutane*), which Adorno rethinks in structural terms so as to identify, metaphorically, the active fabric of nerves, tendons, muscles, veins etc. between the skeleton and the skin. This structure is meant as the concrete compositional fabric between the surface of musical notation and the more abstract framework of the musical work (Hinrichsen [2004]: 208-209). This refers, in Schoenberg's terms, to the domain of musical form, primarily involving articulation and thematic-motivic elaboration (Borio [2007]: 55-57). On this basis, the concept of reproduction can be defined as *mimesis of the subcutaneous*. At a very late stage, in the second half of the 1960s, this idea will suggest to Adorno a revision of his early metaphor, which is a symptom of a still unclear conceptualization:

My hypothesis that the performance is the x-ray photograph of the work requires correction in so far as it provides not the skeleton, but rather the entire wealth of subcutanea. (Adorno [2006]: 160)

In order to deal with the written configuration of the musical work, Adorno develops a theory of notation. To do this he relies on the first volume of Riemann's *Handbuch der Musikgeschichte*, which retraced the history of early musical notation¹. Once Adorno has transferred the concept of

¹ Adorno comments on two different editions of volume 1: the second for part 2 (Riemann [1920]) and the third for part 1 (Riemann [1923]).

performance as reproduction from the domain of sound to that of the musical text, his problem is to exactly identify the place of mimesis with respect to notation, and this beyond its merely symbolic surface or appearance. Early neumatic notation, interpreted by Riemann as «cheironomic», helped Adorno to identify the mimetic root of notation in historical terms. Although from a musicological perspective Riemann's book is now in some respects «of antiquarian interest» (Danuser [2003]: 9), its relevance to Adorno's conceptualization could be hardly underestimated. In one of the prevailing interpretations, the neumes were conceived as derived from the hand movements of the *praecentor*, who in this way suggested not just the pace, but also the melodic intonation of each syllable of the text to be sung. The fact that the neumes were later used also in combination with letter-notation (digraphic neumes) so as to identify through symbols the relative pitches to be sung even in the absence of stave-notation encourages Adorno to identify an historical process of «clarification of musical notation» and to define its subsequent historical development in terms of «transformed mimesis» (Adorno [2006]: 60).

This concept applies to the invention of «mensural notation as an expression of the duration of the notes», producing the «separation of music from text rhythm» (Adorno [2006]: 62) – and also, I would add, a partial emancipation of notation from particular, historically situated musical practices. Adorno does not take seriously the idea that at a certain point the combination of staves (for the pitches) and mensural notation (for their relative duration) came to *replace* the neumes. In his view, mensural notation, as symbolic, has of course repressed the mimetic element of neumatic notation, but without suppressing it. Thus, to Adorno modern notation not only contains neumatic residues within itself, but it has also «developed *substitute functions* for the vanished neumatic element», as in the exemplary case of «*phrase marks*» intended as a «tools» to identify «units of structure» (Adorno [2006]: 94). Even in this case, the relation between this relatively late development of musical notation and the early neumes

can be established only through the mediation of Adorno's idiosyncratic concept of mimesis, while remaining highly debatable in terms of historical research (Schmid [2012]).

However, Adorno relies on Riemann only to identify two important elements of the musical text: the «mensural» element (*das Mensurale*) – defined as «significative» and «the epitome of all that is unambiguously given through symbols» – and the «neumatic» (*das Neumische*) as «mimic», «mimetic» and «gestural» (Adorno [2006]: 67). Therefore, the idea of a mimesis of the subcutaneous can be redefined as the *imitation of the neumatic element* which is in some way “hidden” by the mensural element intended as the symbolic surface of musical notation.

To these aspects Adorno adds a third he terms the «idiomatic» (*das Idiomatische*), defined as «the music-lingual [*musiksprachliche*] element [...] which must be reached through the musical language given in each case» (Adorno [2006]: 67). The idiomatic takes central stage in his discourse because on the one hand it touches on the relation of music to language and on the other it can hardly be situated within the boundaries not only of the musical text, but also of the musical work – as Adorno puts it, it «*encompasses the work*» (Adorno [2006]: 67). This complicates greatly the crucial passage between the theory of musical notation and the theory of reproduction – a complication which Adorno intends to solve by resorting to «Benjamin's theory of language» (Adorno [2006]: 66).

In Adorno's materials related to the theory of reproduction Benjamin's name appears under the form of short references to a few of his writings, theories or definitions. Mostly, he refers to the theory of translation in view of its application to musical performance. In particular, he refers to the following theses: that of translation as form (Adorno [2006]: 166, 216) and that of the original which changes over time (Adorno [2006]: 180, 191, 219), both present in Benjamin's *Vorwort über die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, the preface to his translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens* (Benjamin [1923]). Occasionally, Adorno also refers to

a specific passage of *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, which he mentions as «Ritter's theory» (Adorno [2006]: 63). The passage is devoted to the definition of music as the «antithesis» between spoken language as «thesis» and written language as «synthesis» (Benjamin [1928]: 212-216).

Yet, as has been already observed and discussed (Seiwert [2007], Vieira de Carvalho [2009], Boucquet [2010]), Adorno's theory of reproduction is strongly influenced by two of Benjamin's other essays – unpublished during his lifetime – that developed a theory of language as mimesis. The first is the early essay *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* (1916). Adorno was interested in the idea of language as pure «mediatedness» (*Mittelbarkeit*) which emerges in the statement that something «communicates itself in language and not through language» (Benjamin [2004]: 63). The second is the later *Über das mimetische Vermögen* (1933), which offers striking parallels with Adorno's theory of notation and deserves closer attention.

In the last part, Benjamin's essay proposes a philosophical history of language aimed at exploring the idea of a mimetic origin of language. The first form of reading was «prior to all languages», that is, the reading of the augures «from entrails, the stars, or dances» (Benjamin [2005]: 722). This was the original, purely mimetic form of reading, based on the presupposition of analogies between different facts of the world. The subsequent form was a «new kind of reading, of runes and hieroglyphs», that represented the stage through which «the mimetic gift [...] gained admittance to writing and language» (Benjamin [2005]: 722). Although unclearly, Benjamin goes on to define language as «the highest level» – perhaps in terms of the purest distillation – «of mimetic behaviour, and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity [*unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit*]» (Benjamin [2005]: 722), which speaks against the idea of language as a merely symbolic phenomenon, based on letters as conventional stand-ins for phonemes.

Adorno's «mimetic» relation to Benjamin and his writings has been widely discussed (Seiwert [2007]: 252-256). At any rate, Adorno's view of the

history of notation is clearly a retracing of Benjamin's theory of language in that he ideally envisioned in notation a similar passage from a purely mimetic behaviour (the oral and aural tradition of making music without a text), through a mimetic form of writing (the neumes as imitating the hand's movement and later incorporating letters as symbols of notes) to a conventional and symbolic notation (mensural notation) which nonetheless preserves – or rather reintroduces at a later stage – mimetic aspects (the neumatic element). Yet, unlike Adorno, Benjamin reaches the point of identity by proposing the idea of a «fusion of the semiotic and the mimetic in the sphere of language» hypothetically enhanced by the «rapidity of writing and reading» (Benjamin [2005]: 722). What is most interesting in the present context, however, is that Benjamin conceives of the mimetic and the semiotic as two elements within an integrated whole:

the mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element [das Semiotische]. Thus, the nexus of meaning [Sinnzusammenhang] of words and sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears. (Benjamin [2005]: 722)

I have lingered on this passage because it is useful in identifying the reasons for Adorno's preoccupation with the idiomatic and his difficulties in situating this concept relative to that of the neumatic. These reasons can be traced back to three assumptions that Adorno explicitly mentions as inescapable: 1. the thesis that «music is not a language» (Adorno [2006]: 69) (thesis of non-similarity); 2. the thesis that the musical text and notation in general is «non-intentional» (Adorno [2006]: 167-168) (thesis of non-intentionality); 3. the thesis that the true musical sense (*Sinn*) must be inherent in an autonomous and objective configuration sublimating all the heteronomous and subjective aspects that would make music a situated experience, and that this configuration is the musical work as written text (thesis of autonomy).

These assumptions threaten Adorno's theory of performance as reproduction from the outset, but

it is the definition of the “idiomatic” in particular that represents the main stumbling block in his theorization, and this for many reasons:

First, Adorno explicitly states that the idiomatic includes «a *gestural* element that is *fundamentally* beyond the sphere of notation» and that, consequently, «exceeds mere reproduction» (Adorno [2006]: 55), which shatters the thesis of autonomy.

Secondly, he maintains that «the concept of the idiomatic points to that of language» (Adorno [2006]: 69), but the only way Adorno can accept this idea is to identify a non-linguistic element of language. For this reason, he introduces the concept of «dialect» as the «speechless element of language» (Adorno [2006]: 69). Yet, he does not seem persuaded by this idea and asks himself: «what is a dialect without language?» (Adorno [2006]: 69). Thus, the definition of the idiomatic speaks against the idea of non-similarity of music to language.

Thirdly, to Adorno the idiomatic is «present in the performer», and as such it is not only the «sole condition for concretion» (Adorno [2006]: 55-56), but also the «*precondition* for any interpretation» (Adorno [2006]: 71). This aspect brings the musical performance close to that of the actor, which Adorno mainly interprets in terms of pure mimesis: «to imitate blindly» is to Adorno «the *prerequisite* for an actor» – to imitate, of course, not a “meaning” but just «the melodic-gestural aspect of language» (Adorno [2006]: 159). But what makes the performance of a musician «comparable to that of the actor» is mainly «the interpolation of details» (Adorno [2006]: 2). This introduces a distinction between the details to be interpolated and the action of interpolating these details. In Adorno's theory of notation, the «structural element to be interpolated from the symbols» is of course the neumatic (Adorno [2006]: 67) through its substitute functions as phrase marks for articulation of structure and punctuation, on which the «interpolation of sense in the text» relies (Adorno [2006]: 94). Now, the gestural and mimetic aspect of this process can be still maintained, because of the objective and non-intentional configuration of the musical text, but what about the act of performance as interpolating details? It is evident that

this crucial and eminently creative facet of interpolation, which Adorno considers as an aspect shared by the actor and the musician, can hardly be defined as non-intentional. All the more so in that this aspect is strictly connected to the context of performance as a social practice producing mimetic and also meaningful behaviours. In this sense, the idiomatic element speaks against the thesis of non-intentionality.

Intended as a social practice, musical performance contradicts the idea of reproduction as a purely mimetic behaviour. Unfortunately, Adorno gives performance up for the sake of mimesis, and has to define both the idiomatic and the neumatic as purely mimetic. This is the reason why he comes to distinguish them in terms of “false” and “true” mimesis, as is shown by the idea that the idiomatic «contains the neumatic within itself in impure form» (Adorno [2006]: 67). Consequently, it is the mensural aspect of notation (symbolic, objective, anti-mimetic) that takes the place of the antithesis through which the subjective idiomatic is “purified” into the neumatic as a result. This also explains the meaning of Adorno's fundamental definition: «The task of musical interpretation is to transform the idiomatic element into the neumatic by means of the mensural» (Adorno [2006]: 67).

Adorno's stubbornness in defining the idiomatic as purely mimetic, that is, as non-intentional highlights theoretical shortcomings that depend on assumptions that could be defined as the ballast that sank his ship sailing towards a theory of reproduction. This frustrates, even mocks any hermeneutic efforts towards “interpreting” Adorno's theory and encourages an against-the-grain reading of his tentative conceptualization in view of a theory of musical performance as such. I propose to maintain Adorno's terminology together with the dialectic of mensural (symbolic) and neumatic (mimetic) aspects in the musical text, and to rethink the definition of the idiomatic beyond Adorno's assumptions, particularly his reluctance towards placing a semiotic element in the definition of musical performance.

In doing this I rely on some new musicological paradigms introducing the idea of per-

formance as «a semiotic and creative practice» (Cook [2013]: 6), while explicitly arguing against Adorno's idea of reproduction (Cook [2013]: 8-9, 15, 18-19, *passim*). These are nonetheless useful to rethink Adorno's indeed complex theorization for future perspectives on musical performance – to the same extent to which Adorno's terminology and dialectic remarks can be useful to resituate the musical text within research on musical performance. On the other hand, cognitive approaches to musical gesture (Zbikowski [2011], Godøy [2010], [2011]) developing on the idea of «semiotic gesture» in music as both a structural and meaningful gestalt (Kühl [2011]), together with the application to musical performance of the theories of «embodied cognition» (Leman [2007], [2010]); Leman, Maes [2014]; Geeves, Sutton [2014]), have recently prepared the ground for a reconsideration of traditional concepts, including Adorno's theory.

If Benjamin's idea of language as a “fusion” of semiotic and mimetic aspects could offer Adorno a chance to significantly improve his theory of musical performance even beyond reproduction, the more recent paradigms can help to rethink musical performance more radically, establishing the framework for an accurate redefinition of the idiomatic element as the “semiotic bearer”. All the more so in that Adorno accepts the idea of a mimetic incorporation into notation of historically situated gestures – I am referring to the neumes as strictly connected to early musical practices. What he does not accept is the idea that the idiomatic aspect of performance can represent a kind of reversal of the neumatic. While the neumatic represents the “absorption” of a historically situated musical practice through the imitation of bodily gestures into the musical text (a process of patent disembodiment), the idiomatic could be defined as the agent which “reverts” the musical text, through bodily gestures, into a situated musical practice: that of the embodied musical performance. This would mean capitalizing on Adorno's conceptualization by turning his theory on its head.

If according to Adorno's aforementioned definition the «task of musical interpretation is to

transform the idiomatic element into the neumatic by means of the mensural», I suggest to add – or even replace – the following formulation: *The task of musical performance is to transform the mensural element into the idiomatic by means of the neumatic*. In other words: the unintentional, symbolic level of the score (mensural) is transformed during performance into a meaningful and intentional social practice (idiomatic) through the interpolation of a mimetic level (neumatic) to be intended as an imitation not of the score, but of the ideal of sound that the performer has creatively “inferred” from the score.

In the end, musical performance has to be considered as the interpolation of the neumatic not so much “under”, but rather “over” the mensural in terms of a necessarily subjective superimposition of a largely intentional interpretive grid. By emphasizing the creative contribution of the performer, musical performance would be then defined not only as mimetic behaviour (neumatic), but also as an *archive of semiotic gestures* (idiomatic) that help to shape music through embodied cognition and, in many respects, «beyond the score» (Cook [2013]). Thus, musical performance should not be conceived according to the rhetoric of a *way into* the text – into its inner autonomy and hidden sense, which in the end is no more than hypothetical – but rather as a *way out* of the text, through the creative, embodied interpolation of the neumatic within a social practice that offers the main semiotic and idiomatic framework of musical performance. And yet, the musical text should be considered as lying not entirely *outside*, but *at the limit* of musical performance as a social field, and as one of its preconditions – at least in the tradition of Western art music. The aspect of creative, bodily and semiotic interpolation, instead, should involve the role of subjective imagination as reaching beyond the paradigm of objective reproduction: a situated, intentional and imaginary act of «make-believe» (Walton 1990) which, once again, puts the music performer closer to the actor than to the translator.

Adorno's metaphor of musical performance as translation has been rightfully contested: basically

it is «questionable» because musical performance, unlike translation, implies a passage «of structure into an acoustic result», that is, of musical composition as prescriptive textual configuration into music as perceptible sound. Consequently, «a change of medium» occurs «which has an effect on the ascription of meaning» (Borio [2007]: 71). In addition, it is relevant to note that Adorno paradoxically misses some significant chances offered by Benjamin's theory of translation, which Adorno in any case invokes.

In his preface concerning the task of the translator Benjamin in no way conceived translation in terms of similarity or mimesis, against which rather he argued. In the end of the essay, Benjamin considered Hölderlin's late translation of Sophocles' tragedies as an "archetype" because «the harmony of the languages is so profound that sense [*Sinn*] is touched by language only the way an aeolian harp is touched by the wind» (Benjamin [2004]: 262). In other words, Benjamin proposed that the relation between the original text and its translation is musical *instead of* mimetic, while the image of the Aeolian harp seemed to make a metaphorical claim to non-intentionality, since he refers to an instrument which can be freely played by the wind in many different ways.

Actually, this was a much more complex metaphor, used to suggest two aspects at the same time. First, Benjamin proposed the idea of a "conditioned" and "situated" freedom: although the wind is unintentional, this is not the case of the builder, who intentionally pre-organises without completely pre-determining the possible ways the instrument could play. Here the Aeolian harp is clearly a stand-in for the original text, whose builder – the author – has accepted to leave it free to be played by the wind. But the translator was in no way intended by Benjamin as a "player" of the instrument, but rather – and this is the second relevant aspect of his metaphor – as a situated listener:

[...] translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest, but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own

language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one. (Benjamin [2004]: 258)

On the other hand, and not by chance, the sonic metaphor was invoked by Benjamin for «a theory that strives to find, in a translation, something other than reproduction of meaning» (Benjamin [2004]: 259).

This theory was perhaps involved in Adorno's initial theorization, at least insofar as he defined the musical text in the only way in which it was possible to set up an idea of reproduction: as the «memorial trace of the ephemeral sound» and at the same time as aimed at signifying «an ideal of the sound, not its meaning» (Adorno [2006]: 4) – even though the metaphor of the x-ray image was already there.

In search of a «third element» between «the visual phenomenon, which "is", and the verbal text, which "signifies"» (Adorno [2006]: 4), Adorno chose the first and opted for an idiosyncratic, *silent* reading (Paddison [2006]) of an image which "imitates" – by inference – a hidden reality, disregarding the fact that music as sound both "is" and "signifies" only to the extent to which it is creatively performed.

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